

[Ok, so let's ...]

[00:00:57]

Jerry Smith has actually written a letter and he ran it past me because he wanted me to put my input into it. Do I have that blanket-blank letter. And in that letter he tells some stories. He wrote a letter to president Obama, and I said to him two things, I said: One, I wouldn't go to Obama I'd go to Snyder and or Duggan...

[00:01:36]

[Don't you think it's important to go above their heads because they are sort of causing the...

I also said that we would put it in the - I said you've already got it written, you should do a op-ed in the free press.

[00:01:57]

[Let's start at the beginning again. You went through those stories really quickly and you know, tell me your involvement in them, tell me who you are and then go into the stories again.]

[00:02:24]

I'm Mary Ellen Howard. I am a Sister of Mercy and I am a public policy advocate at Cabrini Clinic which is the oldest free clinic for uninsured people in the United States. It's part of the Holy Trinity Church in the Corktown area of Detroit. I serve on several boards of the city and I became alarmed when I began to hear stories about people needing water in the city.

The first one was at the Detroit Wayne County Health Authority, I'm on that board, and one of the staff members there, Michelle Callaway came to the board to report on a baby shower that they had sponsored which was for poor women who either were pregnant or had just delivered - they had new babies. And they asked the women, first of all, they asked them how many had had breakfast that day and very few had had any breakfast, this was their first meal at lunch, and secondly they asked them, what problems are you dealing with and the mothers reported that a big need was for water to fix formula for their babies. Their water had been shut off and they didn't have water to fix formulas. I was just astounded that that could be the case.

The second story is another board that I serve on which is the Jordan Health Center, school-based health center at Marcus Garvey Academy, which is part of the Detroit Public School system. I happened to be chairing the advisory board one day and after the staff had given their reports, I like to ask the staff, what are you seeing that's new among the kids; what are the trends that you're seeing; what are the new needs. And Quanda Klay, who was a social worker there, reported that hygiene among the kids was a great need, that she had noticed that the kids were dirty, their clothes were dirty and that they

smelled. And she started to put together hygiene kits to give out to the kids with soap in them and a tooth brush and tooth paste and when she started to give them out to the kids she found out that that wasn't the need. The problem was that the water had been turned off in their homes and there was no water to take a shower or take a bath for these little kids. It's a middle school. So she said to the board that day, we just really don't know what to do about this, we've identified this problem but we don't know what to do about it. We don't have showers here for the kids and we don't know how to address this. We don't know where to turn but something has got to be done.

So that's my second story and my third one is a conversation I had with Jerry Smith at the Maud Barlow presentation on water shut offs in Detroit. He was sitting next to me and reported that at the Capuchin Soup Kitchen, they have – their clients, many of them are bringing in empty water jugs to fill up with water at the soup kitchen so they could take it home, and buckets and whatever they can carry because their water has been shut off. And then he further reported that a grandmother had come to him with he little grandson, a little kid, and had asked if there was any possibility they could use the showers at the soup kitchen, which are for homeless men and not ordinarily used by families but could she use the shower to give her little grandson a shower because the water had been turned off in their house.

So it's not just me so I want to say, these three organizations are reporting this across the city! It's a great need and when I first heard about the problem I started to look into it and get involved. Something had to be done. At the time when I first looked into it, there were 40,000 households in the city of Detroit where the water had been shut off already and now this week in the paper they are reporting there's going to be an additional 150,000 shut-offs. This is just unacceptable. It's inhuman. Water is a human right, I am a health provider and I know that you need water to live. And we can't just deprive people of water. We've got to do something about this, there has to be a solution.

[00:08:00]

[Can you talk about anything about what you know of the Water Departments initiative to assist people before their water is shut off?]

Well, I don't know a lot about that, I'm kind of new to all this but, I do know that we... Here's what I've heard: I've heard that the water department is shutting off people water without any notice – if they had a notice maybe they would be able to do something about it. Scrape up the money to pay the bill. Or borrow it or something. But we certainly here at the Cabrini Clinic council our clients that if they think they are in danger of having their water shut off or their utilities shut off, we tell them, let's do everything we can to prevent them getting shut off because once they get it shut off it's terrible to get it turned back on. It's just almost impossible. I have hear stories and I don't know if they are true but I have heard stories or the Water Department coming in and throwing cement down the pipe to prevent people from tapping into it illegally.

[00:09:22]

[I can tell you that there is absolutely no DWSD supported program right now that helps people by subsidizing their bills. They are all third party organization because the department of human services was cut.]

Well, you know, if we privatize the Water Department, we think we have no control over it now, but at least it's owned by the People of the City of Detroit. If we privatize it, it'll be owned by a for-profit - it will be managed by a for-profit company and we will have no say regarding people's right to water, or shut-offs.

[00:10:10]

[Can you talk to be about some of the issues with, around shame and guilt that people might be experiencing because of these water shut-offs?]

Well, you know, we, occasionally, some of our clients here at Cabrini Clinic will report that they have had their water shut off and we try to help them get the water turned back on but people don't want to tell you that. They don't want to tell you that their water has been shut off. They are ashamed to report that. They try to make do. They try to bring their jugs of water to the soup kitchen. They are going over to their ant's to take a shower or their grandmother's to take a shower. We had a family down to street from us, I live on the east side of Detroit, it's a family of four (mother, father and two kids in high school) and they had their water shut off. They asked us if they could come to take water from the tap at the side of our house. And so we gave them a key to be able to use it to get water and then they asked us if we would do their wash for them. For a year and a half we did the wash for this family. And then finally they told us they got a new house – they were able to move from the house they were in into another house and somehow the water bill didn't follow them and the water was on in the house they went to. We've lost them as neighbors, they were good neighbors, good people, always very helpful to us, and – but they couldn't pay their water bill. It was a crazy story and there are a lot of crazy stories out there. This was a house where the mother lived upstairs, in the upstairs flat and she died and the ownership of the house was up for grabs because of her death and another relative moved in upstairs and ran up the bills and nobody – it was like \$7,000, there was no way we could help them pay it but we could help them with some water so we did, we did what we could.

[00:13:15]

[That's the other side of the story: that the increasing amount of vacancies is because of the shut-offs. Not only the vacancy is causing the shut-offs but the shut-offs are causing the vacancies.]

It's all part of ... it's all one piece. The demolition of the houses, the water shut-offs, the foreclosures, the what-ever. You know, why is there this big push right now to demolish all of the houses. It's because we're going to clear land, it'll be vacant and can be sold to developers.

[00:13:58]

[Hold on, you have to say that again because the card filled up, the memory card, I'm sorry. You're doing a really great job. You must talk to media more than a couple times a year.]

Yes I do and I give talks. At one point in my career I taught second grade and after you've taught second grade, nothing else scares you. You can do anything!

[My sister teaches second grade teacher. We are all very proud of her.]

Yeah, that's a critical year. Kids either learn to read or they don't.

[She teaches in a low-income area in south Denver and I'm very proud of her but I wish she would understand that the parental ignorance that she witnesses from her student's parents that she complains about is not their fault, they are working six jobs between the two if them. We were both raised in a pretty intense situation of affluence and she took the direct route of giving back to communities by teaching and I took more of a structural-analytic, and we both inform each other but it's frustrating sometimes to have conversations with each other. When her main interest is the children...]

Her's is direct service, she is on the front line.

[00:16:10]

[It's kind of hard to watch sometimes because, I don't know, I love her dearly but, yeah, anyways...she's an amazing girl, I've very proud of her but sometimes I wish she would see the back end. It seems like you do, but you are a lot older than her.]

Oh well, you know, I was here at Cabrini Clinic for a couple of years before I figured out that free clinics weren't the answer. That we had to do something to change the system. You know and that's what... She's doing to direct service and you're doing to systemic change.

[00:16:58]

[So, you have to say that part again, that you were saying about the big picture.]

What I believe is that all of these issues are one piece. They are interrelated. The fact that there is this big push right now to demolish so many homes very quickly. And also, they are shutting off water in 150,000 households right now. 3,000 a week. Why. The whole issue of forcing people to clean up their houses or the city is taking them over. Why is all this happening right now? It seems to me that we're clearing the land so that now we have vacant land, which can be sold and developed. So these homes are a commodity so if you shut off the water, pretty soon they move out. And then they day they move out the

scrappers move in and strip the house, nobody can live there – it's not saleable, it's not rentable and pretty soon it's gone, too. I mean I watch it on my own block. I see it.

[00:18:42]

[A lot of people will argue, Detroit needs blight removal, Detroit needs development. Can you please offer a sane counter.]

Yeah, Detroit needs all those things, I agree. But regarding the blight removal, I have a little different approach on it. I said – who was it that was going to do all the blight removal initially... Pulte. One of the Pulte sons was going to go through and tear down 80,000 structures or whatever.

[Can you say who Pulte is?]

Oh, Pulte is the son of the housing developer, one of the biggest builders of housing in the United States. Big money. They are out of the – originally here from the Detroit area. I think they moved to Atlanta. But until recently they were here in Detroit and one of the Pulte sons was volunteering, he's got lots of money, he was going to do – *free*, for the city – demolition. I don't know why the city turned him down but anyway, when I heard what he as going to do I said, Oh my gosh, we have all these abandoned homes and abandoned structures around and certainly they are not what we're like but at least they give the image or the impression that there's a city here. When we tear them all down and it's all vacant open land, the city is gone. So I'm a little hesitant to tear down everything until we have a plan. Of what we're going to do!

And the other thing is, I believe – right now there is no affordable housing in Detroit. So these people who are being evicted out of their housing, they have no place to go, because it's not affordable. And I'm afraid, you know, I'm getting older, probably at some point I'm going to have to move to an apartment or something that's all on one floor. And I want to stay in Detroit, but the way the rents are right now, I don't think I can afford it. So, will I have to leave? And you know, and I'm... I'm not poor. I'm not rich, but I'm not poor. And I can make choices and ... but poor people can't make choices. They don't have any place to go. There is no affordable housing in Detroit.

[00:21:59]

[So, did you see what was happening a few months ago in the news - about the 150 senior citizens being evicted from the downtown apartment building for a new..]

The Albert. That's your video! I love that video! It's wonderful!

[00:02:26]

[It's a challenge to make something as concise and viral as that.]

7 minutes. You did a wonderful job. It's really powerful. You know, we've got to look at the people who have been living here. Yes, it's nice to have all these yuppies moving in but what about the people who are here right now. What about me? Where am I going to live? I can't afford \$1,300 a month. You know, that's crazy! I don't know. We need some.. the community benefit agreement: for every unit of housing that's \$1,300 a month, we need a unit of housing that's \$500 a month. You know, we need something affordable for poor people. A lot of poor people right now in the city are paying half of their income in rent. That's why their water is getting shut off. It's all one picture.

[00:23:42]

[Talk about dental care in the city.]

Well, dental care is ... complex. I want to say, up until now, up until we expanded Medicaid, poor people really didn't have access to dental care. Now, the new expanded Medicaid, which was just available April 1, covers dental. So people on Medicaid for the first time in a long time, adults, now have coverage for dental. Now, just because you have coverage doesn't mean you can find a dentist who will accept Medicaid. That's your next challenge. Somebody described it as having a – you're Medicaid card is a license to hunt. There are very few providers for dental in the city. We are trying to do something about that through the Health Authority, we are trying to get some more dental residencies in the city but it's been difficult.

[00:25:06]

[Can we talk about the parallels between denial of access to dental or difficulty getting dental and the water shut-offs?]

[00:25:17]

Well it's all related to poverty. And I think you can't the depth of the poverty in Detroit unless you live here. You really can't. I mean, this is a third world country. It's just awful. The average income in Detroit is what, \$13,000 or \$14,000 per household. How do you live on that? \$1000 a month, that's not going to pay for a \$1,300 per month apartment. That's the average, so 50% make less than that. And it's 60% of children live below federal poverty. And federal poverty is not a living wage. So when you say there's no access to health care, there's no access to dental, there's the utility shut-offs, there's no affordable housing, there's no transportation. Let's talk about that. They're all related. There's no grocery store, there's no chain grocery stores in the city. That can be a good thing and a bad thing. But why is that? It's because of the depth of the poverty in this city.

[00:26:55]

[Can you talk about the discrepancy between the “hope” narrative, the “Say Nice Things About Detroit” narrative and the “blight” narrative, because there’s a blight-hope paradigm I think...]

Well, I have a button on my jacket, it says “Say Nice Things About Detroit.” I’m one of those people. People say bad things about Detroit, I take it personally, I get mad. It’s like you are saying bad things about me. That’s how identified I am with Detroit. So I’m one of those people who say “Say Nice Things About Detroit.” The city may be bankrupt but the people- we don’t have bankrupt people. In spite of all the negative things I’ve been saying, all the problems that people face, all the things that they deal with, people sometimes say to me: how can you do your job, how do you deal with people who are so desperate all day long, doesn’t it just wear you down? They are desperate, yes, but they are also hopeful. The patients that we see here at CC are very courageous, they survive against great odds. And they, by and large, are really people of faith, too. God is very important in their lives. And they really believe that God loves them and holds them. And that’s how they survive and they are an inspiration to me.

[00:28:40]

[Tell me about this...]

I wanted to tell you another story. One of our nurse volunteers said to me one day: Before I came here to volunteer, my attitude was, well if these people would just pull themselves up by their bootstraps, they wouldn’t need CC. And she said, what the patients have taught me since I’ve been here is that they don’t have any bootstraps. You can’t pull yourself up by your bootstraps if you don’t have any. And so I see it time after time. Our patients really convert our staff and our volunteers. They teach them a lot about what it is to be poor. And sick. And uninsured in the city of Detroit.

[00:29:48]

[Can you tell me and make very clear the difference between *there is such a disparity between Detroit’s coming-up and we’re Tech-Center and we’re Detroit Future City* and how disgusting that is when that rhetoric is spit out in the face of water shut-offs.

[00:30:09]

Well, there has been absolutely no attention to the neighborhoods in Detroit. And they’ve really been abandoned. By the city structure, by the folks that have moved to the suburbs, by the federal government, the state government, the city has been abandoned and you know, I live on the east side of Detroit and I just look around me and I say, It’s disappearing. The city is disappearing around me. There is nothing left. There are blocks

with no houses on them any more. And where did those people go? I mean I can't tell you, right next door to us, how many people they've got living in that house. But there are a lot of people in that house. On the first floor maybe 12. On the first floor flat, maybe 12 people. That's where they've gone. They are just crowding in. Throw their money together, crowd in, rent something and they are trying to survive. Trying to keep their bills paid and it's really a struggle.

People need jobs, and so I'm not against economic development. I'm for economic development. But there has got to be more than economic development. We have to help people to get ready for that economic development. We have to give them a good education. We need to give them water. They need to have water and food and shelter, if they are going to get a job. The simple basics of life.

[00:32:09]

[I think... is there anything else you want to say?]

...I don't know.

[You've spoken articulately, very concisely, and I will probably use this cut of the video a lot because you are very compassionate and you're analytical and compassionate, which is a really rare and beautiful combination.]

Well thank you, that's kind of you.

[So is here anything else you want to put forth?]

[00:32:46]

We call ourselves a Christian country although I know, I know that we have many wonderful brothers and sisters who are Jewish, Muslim and other religions, too. A lot of them volunteer right here at the CC, and we share values, and when you look at those values ... as a Christian person I look to Matthew 25: *Whatsoever you did for the least of my brothers you did for me*. And yet we seem to be abandoning the least of our brothers. They don't have a place at the table. And we are going to be judged by how we treat them and we are not treating them very well these days.

[00:34:00]

[So I was thinking maybe I could take some footage of the ...]

[00:34:07]

...Even if you haven't got picture of ... if we don't have patients downstairs, I've got lots of photographs.

[I'd love to use them in the... the public health part of it in general is a very important part of the story.]

Well I think so too, that's how I get into it. That's where I'm coming from, is that it's essential to health! You can't argue with that.

[Show me around...

It's a real pleasure and an honor to speak with you I think that you do beautiful things.]

Well, that's mutual, that's mutual. I love your video.

[Thanks, I hope I can do another one that's as helpful]

So powerful. I don't know. Their original one, the one that you cut into, you know it's so smarmy.

[00:35:30]

[I know... so I have to say that many, that I didn't find that. Tom Stevens and Bill Wylie-Kellerman found that and sent it along so they deserve so credit, too, for finding the video.]

Oh wow, they sent it to you. You interspersed the...

[Yeah, and they said, some sort of mash-up needs to happen with that and it was just serendipitous that I happened to have to those interviews with Albert residents, or the Griswold residents already... *Unintelligible*... Well, thank you. That's really beautiful. *Takes still of Mary Ellen next to MLK portrait.* Can you look towards the window? Beautiful, beautiful, okay, you can walk through the door. That's great, thank you.]

So Kate, do you make a living doing this?

[I try but I don't make a who lot of money.]

You're an artist, artists struggle. Do you have insurance?

[00:37:05]

[I have the affordable care act, although I think I probably qualify for Medicaid.]

You should do it!

[Yeah. It's a really great program actually but I..]

You know, we are enrolling people here.

[You are? Because I go between New York and here so frequently that I often am in Detroit and don't have access, I enrolled in New York State. So is Medicaid national?]

No, It's a state program.

[So I mean, come on, we call ourselves the *United* State of America and you can't get health care in New York when you're in Michigan?]

Yeah, we've got to go to a national system, that's what we should have done, Medicare for all. But we didn't do it. It was a compromise and it wasn't. It was really not a good compromise. But people are getting access to... it's better.

[So this is the exam room...]

Yes, it is.

And this is Melly, Melly does our – hi Melly, you're getting your picture taken – Melly does our prescription assistance.

[Hi how are you Melly, my name is Kate, Kate Levy.]

Kate is doing a documentary on water shut-offs in Detroit. Do you know anybody who's had their water shut off?

Melly: Not at the moment.

[That's good!]

And then this is our pharmacy. And we get our, Most of our medicines through the indigent drug programs through the pharmaceutical companies.

Insulin.

All of our patients get their medication for free.

[I bet you guys give really good quality care here.]

Yeah, we do, we have wonderful providers. The docs who volunteer here are some of the best in the city. No big egos, they are wonderful people.

This, Kate, we moved in here five years ago, and this was a convent. The nuns lived here and taught in the school behind us. And this room over here, this was the chapel. And now it's the waiting room – isn't it pretty? It's a beautiful facility I mean it's nicer than my doctor's office.

This is our patient education room, we do our diabetic classes in here, educate the patients on their medications.

This is Michael.

Hi, let me introduce you to Kate Levy. Kate is a documentarian and she did that – I don't know if you two have seen it – that wonderful documentary on the Albert? She's doing one now on water shut-offs. She's working with the People's Water Board and Michigan Welfare Rights. And all these organizations we're getting to know and love. I'm getting involved with water.

Anyways, this is Kelly here, and Kelly is our new executive director.

Thank you for that great piece, thank you for the great work you do – nice to meet you.

Alicia is our new clinical nurse manager. So I've been telling her a little bit about Cabrini Clinic.

[It's an amazing place.]

You've never been before? I'm so glad you came.

[I love community organizing that comes out of necessities. Like health care.]

Filming of corkboard

[00:43:40]

And this is *How bad is poverty in Detroit?* This is the US Census Bureau 2012 did this, do you want me to post it up her?

[No I like your hands. What does it say?]

It says that median household income in Michigan is \$46,900 and in Detroit it's \$23,600, so it's one half of the median income in the state of Michigan. And of course, even in Michigan outside of Detroit it's probably higher than \$46,000 but we pull it down. And in

Detroit – in Michigan 17.4% of people live below federal poverty level and in Detroit it's 42.3%. And 60% of children. So how bad is poverty in Detroit? It's bad. A socialist who gives away free health care – you are thinking of Jesus.

Sign reads:

Obama is not a brown skinned anti-war socialist who gives away free health care: you're thinking of Jesus.

[00:45:24]

[So what is this? *Referring to balloon sculpture*]

Well, this is a nun-balloon – she was at my retirement party.

[Let me just get you with the balloons. Oh my God, this is great, I'm making a video so...]

This is nice, too, have you ever seen this? This is How to Build a Community.

- turn off your TV
- leave your house
- know your neighbors
- look up when you're walking
- greet people
- sit on your stoop
- plant flowers
- use your library
- play together
- buy from local merchants
- share what you have
- help a lost dog

all the simple little things, you know.

[Well, thank you so much.]